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Following is an address delivered by Joseph W. Twinam, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, on behalf of James L. Buckley, Under Secretary for Security Assistance, Science and Technology, before the National Conference of Editorial Writers in Providence, Rhode Island, September 25, 1981.

I am very pleased to be with you and thank you for graciously receiving me as a literally last minute substitute for Jim Buckley. Jim had wanted very much to be with you and truly regrets that responsibilities, not unrelated to the subject he wished to discuss with you, prevent his being here. That subject, consistent with your program chairman's injunction that our topic be timely and important, is the current household acronym AWACS [airborne warning and control system], specifically the Reagan Administration proposal to provide Saudi Arabia with AWACS and other air defense enhancement equipment.

First let me try to place this aircraft and the other items of military equipment we propose to sell to Saudi Arabia in their proper perspective. Only in this way can the importance of these sales, and the reasons for the Reagan Administration's commitment to them, be fully understood.

The main goal of this Administration in international affairs is to help achieve a world in which nations are free to pursue their own peaceful ends without the threat of external aggression or intimidation. We are confident that in such a world our own interests will be best protected, and the values and principles we cherish will find more fertile soil. We do not delude ourselves that the path to these objectives is always easy or obvious.

What is absolutely clear, however, is that the free world has lost dangerous ground these last few years. All nations of the free world face, around the globe, challenges which are of such scale that they can be mastered only if the strength and engagement of the United States is brought to bear. Yet we cannot do the job alone. We can only do it if we are able to work in close cooperation with other strategically important nations throughout the free world.

The experience of the last few years speaks for itself. Given the aims and growing capabilities of our principal adversaries, further retrenchment in U.S. power and influence can only guarantee greater global instability and graver threats to our most vital interests. The policies being pursued by the Reagan Administration are intended, first, to rebuild our ability to project credible American power to distant places, should the need arise, and second, to work with other friendly nations to restore or strengthen stability in regions of critical importance to the West. Our task is difficult, but it is a manageable one, if we have the foresight and determination to pursue it.

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Regional Security

The Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf are very far from our borders. But we have a clear and substantial stake in the continued sovereignty and security of nations there and in their continued good relations with us and with the West. We have the most direct interest in helping them acquire the capability to better defend themselves and, in the process, to deter aggression. They need our help for their own security, and we benefit from cooperation with them.

We were painfully reminded during the oil embargo of 1973 and 1974 that the Persian Gulf is the source of much of the energy on which the industrial democracies will be critically dependent until well into the next century. Until the British withdrew their forces from the area in 1971, the free world depended primarily on Britain to maintain stability in the gulf and to assure Western access to its oil. But for long before 1971, we had pursued an important security assistance relationship with Saudi Arabia. In the 1970s, we looked primarily to Iran, in cooperation with other gulf states, to pick up the burden which the British had so ably carried.

This arrangement in turn lasted less than a single decade. The fall of the Shah in 1978 coincided with two other ominous developments. The first was the dramatic increase in Soviet military capabilities during the 1970s. While the United States was spending more than $200 billion in Vietnam and deferring basic modernization of its military forces, the Soviet Union was engaged in the most massive buildup of military hardware and infrastructure that the world has seen.

The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan was the starkest possible demonstration that the Soviets not only now possess the military capability to conduct major operations on their southern flank without detracting from their military posture on their eastern and western fronts, but that they are prepared to use that capability to support their political objectives—at least so long as they can do so with relative impunity.

The second development is the growing capability of radical regional states to attack and destroy critical oil facilities in Saudi Arabia and other gulf nations and to attempt to block Western access to the gulf itself. I speak, of course, of Ethiopia, South Yemen, and Iran. The first two are now well-armed Soviet proxies who last month joined with Libya in a tripartite alliance specifically aimed at Saudi Arabia and Egypt. At the outbreak of the Iraq-Iran war, Iran threatened to close the Hormuz Strait—through which two-thirds of the world's oil exports pass. It also sent combat aircraft across the gulf, underscoring Iran's capacity to threaten neighboring oil-producing states. It was in this context that the Saudis requested that we deploy U.S. AWACS to Saudi Arabia, and that we rapidly responded.

In short, in less than half a decade, the Persian Gulf has been transformed. From a secure source of the petroleum essential to Western economies, it has become an area which is extremely vulnerable to attack by regional forces, as well as to a major offensive by newly deployed forces of the Soviet Union.

It is against the former threat that we seek to arm Saudi Arabia while we modernize our own forces so as to better cope with the latter threat should the need arise. These two efforts, I might add, are closely interrelated, because our ability to project our forces in the event of a major emergency in the Persian Gulf will depend in large part on the degree to which we have been able to work out cooperative security arrangements with the front-line states of the region.

Since the fall of the Shah, we have worked to develop a new set of relationships in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East that can reestablish a reasonable degree of stability, protect our friends in the area, insure the security of the West's principal sources of imported oil, and establish an infrastructure consistent with our rapid deployment forces should a major emergency lead the nations of the area to request our direct support.

While insuring the security of Saudi Arabia is obviously not the only element in this effort, it is clearly a key one. Saudi Arabia is the center of the conservative forces in Islam. Its pro-Western, anti-Communist positions offer a nonradical approach to modernization. Because of its special position as custodian of the holy places of Islam, it has an influence that reaches far beyond the Arab world to a community of nations encompassing 750 million Muslims. It currently dedicates more than 5% of its national income to aid a large group of poorer countries, including nations such as Sudan, Somalia, North Yemen, Turkey, Pakistan, and Morocco, where the United States has important strategic interests as well.

Thus, the success of U.S. policy in the region depends on our ability to develop a close working relationship with Saudi Arabia. This in turn depends on our own willingness to help the Saudis acquire, in their own right, the capability to defend their own most important asset. This we can do—and the Saudis know it as well as we—without in any way detracting from our unshakable commitment to Israel's security or lessening Israel's ability to defeat an attack from any combination of hostile forces in the region.

The Need to Improve Saudi Air Defenses

The military threats against which the Saudis seek to improve their defenses are real. An attack could plausibly come from several regional sources: for instance, from a spillover of the Iran-Iraq war or from South Yemen or Ethiopia, where a significant Soviet military presence underscores the region's instability and the dangers of Soviet penetration. It is important to understand in this context that an indirect military thrust from South Yemen, for example, could be as serious for the Saudis as a direct oilfield attack, because it could trigger a range of other threats—Saudi Arabia is very large in territory and small in population. Its military forces are relatively small and widely dispersed.

Both we and the Saudis fully realize that the air defense enhancement package we have submitted to the Congress will not enable the Saudis to defend themselves against a direct Soviet attack. Only we can do that. The proposed sale, however, will vastly enhance our ability to do so. It will, for example, insure the existence of an extensive logistics base and support infrastructure in Saudi Arabia- including spare parts—facilitating U.S. reinforcement. It would also greatly expand opportunities for close cooperation between Saudi, U.S., and other regional forces in a manner that could greatly upgrade the air defenses of the entire area. But equally important, the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia that would be evidenced by the sale could, in itself, represent a significant deterrent to Soviet adventurism.

In the meantime, present Saudi air defenses are inadequate. Saudi oil facilities, which lie on very flat land adjacent to the Persian Gulf, are highly vulnerable to surprise attack by low-flying aircraft. Early warning is critical. With current Saudi ground radars, except for the presence of the U.S. AWACS, little warning is possible, and severe damage could be inflicted on the facilities before Saudi interceptors could respond.

The four elements of the currently proposed sale—AWACS, air refueling tankers, conformal fuel tanks for the F-15s, and air-to-air missiles—would significantly improve Saudi capability to defend against regional air attacks.

The AWACS aircraft, which operates at around 30,000 feet, would provide sufficient warning of an air attack to enable Saudi fighters to scramble and intercept the enemy before they can carry out their attack.

The conformal fuel tanks and the air refueling tanker aircraft—equipment to extend the range of Saudi F-15s—would enable F-15s to defend east coast petroleum facilities while operating out of bases to the south and west that are distant and, therefore, safer.

Sidewinder air-to-air missiles, with the capability for head-on attack against hostile aircraft, are the only weapons that will permit Saudi interceptors to engage and destroy attacking aircraft *before* they can destroy the oil facilities—even with the advance warning provided by the AWACS.

In addition, of course, this sale would bring with it a very high degree of long-term military and technical collaboration between the United States and Saudi Arabia by insuring the substantial presence of U.S. maintenance and support personnel in Saudi Arabia throughout the life of the systems, that is, for many years.

Implications for Israeli Security

Finally, the Administration has carefully studied the implications of this sale, and of the larger relationship which it symbolizes, for Israeli security. We recognize that any enhancement of Saudi military capabilities might in theory complicate the task faced by Israeli defense planners. Yet Israel enjoys today—and will continue to enjoy after our proposed sales are completed—so decisive a superiority over any combination of regional forces that the practical impact of our proposals on Israeli security would be small. By contrast, the longer run benefits which we seek with our policy toward Saudi Arabia and other gulf states will improve Israel's security by reducing the risk of conflict in the region and enhancing our ability to bring moderate Arab states into the Middle East peace process.

The mythology that has grown up around the AWACS is extraordinary. Contrary to claims, the AWACS cannot collect photographic intelligence. Nor can it collect any intelligence at all on ground targets. The only information it collects is the most perishable kind—aircraft tracks which become useless in a matter of minutes if they cannot be acted upon. Neither do they have an offensive capacity that could jeopardize Israeli security, nor does the equipment we would be providing the Saudis represent the kind of highly advanced technology whose capture by the Soviets would jeopardize significant U.S. security interests. In brief, the addition of AWACS to the Saudi inventory would greatly improve Saudi Arabia's ability to protect its eastern oilfields; but it would not significantly improve Saudi ability to conduct attacks against Israel, nor would it improve Saudi ability to assist other Arab nations to do so.

With or without AWACS and the other equipment in the Saudi air defense package, Israel's highly effective air defense systems, coupled with Saudi vulnerability to retaliation from Israel, provides the strongest possible deterrent to any potential Saudi attack. The Saudis, moreover, recognize that Israel's air defense system—including pilots, aircraft, surface-to-air systems, and crews—is extraordinarily capable, and that Saudi missions near or into Israeli airspace could be suicidal.

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Key Questions

The problem of safeguarding Israel's security interests is not, of course, the only one which has been raised in connection with these sales. It is clear from conversations with Members of Congress and the public that at least three other key questions must be addressed.

- What is there in the U.S.-Saudi *political* relationship to justify this sale?
- If Saudi security is so important to us, why don't we do the job ourselves?
- Why is Saudi Arabia any more dependable an anchor for our regional strategy than Iran proved to be?

Let me address these questions together for they are closely interrelated.

The Saudi leadership believes that their country's national interest is best served by the kind of security relationship that we have proposed. The point to keep in mind, however, is that this judgment is made in the face of considerable pressure, in large part Soviet and radical Arab in origin. The Saudis' capacity to resist such pressure is very largely dependent upon their confidence in the United States and in their own military capability to deal with local threats. These two are inseparable.

For compelling reasons, political and nationalistic, the Saudis cannot move to an explicit dependence upon the United States for their defense in those areas; they are clearly potentially capable of looking after themselves. Such a policy would severely undermine their leadership and influence in the Arab world, an influence which clearly serves our own national interests.

What has to be understood, in short, is that the only viable relationship today is one that is built on the solid rock of mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and of confidence in mutuality of interests and is perceived as such. The stationing of significant U.S. combat forces on Saudi soil is simply not a feasible alternative to strengthening their capacity to look after their own defenses to the best of their ability. No proud sovereign nation should be expected to delegate such responsibilities to another and distant nation. We would not do so in their shoes, and we cannot realistically expect them to do more—especially as they have alternative sources for entirely adequate substitutes, namely the British Nimrod (similar to our AWACS) and French fighter aircraft.

Finally, let me briefly turn to the question of what the consequences would be if Congress does not approve the sale—consequences for the United States, for Israel, for an enduring peace in the Middle East. The downside risks are large.

Although some complementarity of Saudi and U.S. interests would remain, their doubts about the value of U.S. commitments would surely grow. Almost certainly the Saudi ability to accept the risks of embracing our regional strategy and of supporting the

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peace process would decline. Similarly, Saudi willingness and capacity to exercise a moderating political influence in Arab councils would also inevitably suffer. While we might succeed in muddling through, failure to complete this present transaction would be so large and so important a signal that our adversaries would be sorely tempted to take advantage.

The result, inevitably, will be that our regional security strategy will be undermined. The chances of Soviet political coercion and military intimidation will grow as the prospects for continued Western access to oil will diminish. With the damage done to the credibility of presidential commitments and his reputation for foreign policy leadership, one can reasonably wonder whether the damage—itself substantial—would be confined to our national security objectives in the Persian Gulf and Middle East.

Ironically, Israel may pay as large a price as we if this sale is defeated. It almost surely will face a Saudi Arabia which buys from the Europeans the same military capabilities as we propose to sell, but a Saudi Arabia which is less responsive to U.S. influence, less willing to work with us in the search for a lasting peace, and less able to resist the pressure of radical forces from inside and outside the region. Indeed, if the sale is defeated the only winners will be those who would benefit from regional turmoil and curtailed Western influences and curtailed Western access to oil.

I have tried to outline the broad context within which the President decided to go ahead with this sale and its political and strategic rationale. I have touched more briefly on the specific systems involved and on several other important topics, which I am prepared to discuss with you further in response to your interests.■

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